Kochi, the fashion destination in South India

Between a European colonial past that beats strongly and a thriving artistic present, the city where traditional Indian medicine was born intoxicated with its mixture of colors and fragrances.

Decades ago, the most alternative travelers made Goa's beaches fashionable. It was a more bohemian and alternative trip to India, apart
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from the historical and cultural circuits of the north. Now it seems that the turn has come to the coast of Kerala, in the south of the country, and in particular to Kochi, a city that attracts a traveler who seeks different experiences in more relaxed destinations. In addition, Kochi has been chosen by Lonely Planet as one of the 10 cities in the world worth discovering in 2020.

Located on the tropical coast of Malabar (Kerala), the former colonial Cochin has become in recent years a brand new example of the use of renewable energy, as it has the first airport in the world that works totally with solar energy, which was awarded the 2018 Champions of the Earth prize awarded by the United Nations. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. With bohemian cafés, accommodations in private homes located in peaceful colonial-era streets and a handful of art galleries, this city remains true to its heritage while firmly embracing a new modernity. In 2020, urban art will enter the scene at the Kochi-Muziris Biennial, placing India on the map of contemporary art festivals.

A canoe on one of the characteristic 'backwaters' or navigable canals in Kerala. TITO KOCHUVEETTIL (ALAMY)

'Backwaters', plantations and beaches in Kerala

Kerala, the state of southern India where Kochi is located, is a strip of land that covers about 600 kilometers of wonderful beaches overlooking the Arabian Sea. For many travelers is a haven of peace and tranquility, a feeling that is accentuated to the surf languid network of backwaters sparkling water (backwaters) and visit tea plantations and spices covering the mountains that rise behind the Oriental Ghats, with its natural reserves and its fresh mountain seasons. They say it is the most beautiful state in southern India, also the least poor, with a comforting greenery in the shade of palm trees that makes the traveler
reconcile after the accelerated pace of other more bustling areas of the second most populous country on Earth.

Kerala treasures a fascinating story whose imprint is present in cities as evocative as Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) or Kochi itself. Beyond the backwaters (navigable channels that run parallel to the Arabian Sea), we can find other incentives to make Kerala our ideal destination. Among its powerful claims is its gently spicy cuisine and Ayurvedic treatments (Ayurveda, the traditional medicine of India, was born here). We will also be able to observe wild elephants in freedom in the nature reserve of Wayanad, 110 kilometers long, where exotic birds also live and the occasional tiger.

If we do not dare with such nature, we have interesting traditions full of color such as Kathakali, a mixture of theater and dance originating in this area of India that uses gestural language, makeup and a very ornate costume to tell epic stories in which Legendary heroes fight against the forces of evil. The parties and regattas of the so-called snake-boats (chundan vallam) fill with life even the smallest and most remote villages, especially in summer. The so-called backpacking paradises are now on the beaches of Kovalam and Varkala, until relatively quiet fishing villages, where there is now a flourishing world of Ayurveda and yoga therapies.

Despite having a population that exceeds 35 million people, Kerala is possibly the quietest state in the country, with 900 kilometers of interconnected rivers, lakes, canals and lagoons.
surrounded by coconut palms and picturesque villages. The best way to explore this waterlogged rural world is aboard a **houseboat** and let the days flow while we surrender to the contemplation of timeless-looking villages, feasts based on seafood curries and restful dreams under the stars.

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**Kochi, open city**

The first to arrive called her Cochin. It was the first European colonial settlement in India, where the Portuguese arrived at the beginning of the 16th century (1503), to later assign the witness to Dutch and British. The **Basque** explorer of **Gama** (1467-1524) and the Navarrese missionary of the Society of Jesus **San Francisco Javier** (1506-1552), better known by the nickname of Apostle of the Indies, passed through here.

Key city in the **spice trade**, for more than 600 years it has attracted merchants, explorers and travelers. Located in a splendid estuary on the coast of Kerala, Kochi is still a very special city, with an **incredible mix of cultures**: giant Chinese fishing nets, a 450-year-old synagogue, old mosques, Portuguese and Dutch times houses and Ruinous remains of the Raj, the British Crown Government in India.
Emerging from the great flood of the Periyar River in 1341, the city has about 200 renovated colonial villas, ranging from the intimate to the ancient and the boutique-chic style. These are private accommodations where the hosts offer sumptuous breakfasts, endless stories and advice on Kerala’s cuisine.

Kochi is a cultural exception that pivots effortlessly between past and present, heritage and hipster, urban and nature. There Christians, Jews, Hindus and Muslims live in harmony. You can be visiting the oldest church in India and, after a while, be touring the spice bazaars of Mattancherry, full of synagogues, or renting a boat to cross the waters full of water lilies when it gets dark and begins the bid (prayer) of the twilight. Kochi is also an important center of Kerali arts (traditional and contemporary) and as a destination to see shows of Kathakali (classical dance-theater of mythological themes) and Kalarippayat (traditional martial arts).

The Portuguese, Dutch and British heritage of Fort Cochin

The most European part of the city is called Fort Cochin and includes a couple of small sandy beaches, perfect to merge with the locals at sunset and contemplate the arrival of the tankers. A popular promenade winds from the beach of Mahatma Gandhi, on the west coast, to the picturesque Chinese fishing nets and the fish market, where the catch of the day is sold, which can then be tasted for very little money in one of the simple restaurants from nearby Tower Road.
WHEN TO GO TO KOCHI

The high season to visit this area of South India goes from December to March, with warm days, cool nights, expensive accommodations and mass events such as the Kochi-Muziris Biennial and the costume parades and elephants of the Kochi Carnival. From July to November the rains of the monsoon and the occasional cyclone arrive. Accommodation in private homes is a bargain from April to June, when the temperature rises.

To soak up the Portuguese heritage we can go to the church of San Francisco, which the Franciscans built in 1503 and which is listed as the oldest European temple in India. The current faded yellow building was built in the mid-16th century to replace an old wooden chapel, although the Dutch and British would later modify it. The remains of the explorer Vasco da Gama, who died in Cochin in 1524, rested there 14 years before they were transferred to Lisbon, and his tombstone is still there. In the tranquil garden of the house of the bishop can visit the Indo-Portuguese museum, where there are also traces of the first Catholics in India.

We also find the Dutch in their graves, specifically in the Dutch cemetery, consecrated in 1724, near the beach of Kochi. There remain the worn tombstones reminiscent of the merchants and soldiers of the Netherlands.

The English arrived later in Kochi and in some cases demolished the previous thing and reconstructed in another style. Like the Basilica of Santa Cruz, 1902, built on a Portuguese church of the fourteenth century that the British threw to build another, also Catholic, in neoclassical style, with a pastel-colored interior that houses pieces from different historical periods.

To take the pulse of Kochi’s modernity you need to visit its art galleries, such as the David Hall Gallery, in front of the Plaza de Armas, in a beautiful bungalow built on what were three houses of the Dutch era built in turn with the remains of demolished Portuguese churches. Now it is a cultural center where emerging artists exhibit. The Kashi Gallery is the pioneer of the cultural resurrection of Fort Cochin and exhibits itinerant samples of local artists in a creatively restored Dutch house, next to one of Kerala’s most fabulous cafés, the Kashi Art Café, a space full of natural light, with zen atmosphere and a vertical garden.
Mattancherry and the Jewish Quarter

About 32 kilometers southeast of Fort Cochin we find Mattancherry, the former bazaar district and epicenter of the spice trade. It is still full of condiment stores but also large and expensive cashmere shops. If they look like a tourist, the drivers of the autorickshaws (as the tuk-tuk or motorized tricycle vehicles are known in India) will do everything possible to take you there and get a commission. In fact, any cheap circuit in the neighborhood includes the unavoidable visit to a few stores.

In the middle of Mattancherry stands the Jewish quarter of Jew Town, a bustling port area with a spectacular synagogue. In its streets, lots of small businesses are crowded with old dilapidated buildings and the atmosphere is full of strong aromas of ginger, cardamom, cumin, turmeric and cloves. Further south is the old Muslim neighborhood of Kochi.

The Mattancherry Palace, now converted into a museum, was the generous gift offered to the Rajah of Kochi, Veera Kerala Varma (1537-1565), as a gesture of goodwill by the Portuguese in 1555, although the Dutch reformed in 1663. It combines the styles Europeans and Keralis, but the most interesting are the Hindu murals of the royal chambers, dated between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and surprisingly well preserved, representing legends of the sacred and epic texts of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas, with intricate details and colorists.
The other icon of the neighborhood is the Pardesi synagogue. It was built in 1568 but the Portuguese destroyed it a century later and the Dutch rebuilt it a little later when they took the city. The elaborate floor tiles, hand painted with willow motifs, from Canton (China) and added in 1762 during a major remodeling stand out. The synagogue is superbly lit by Belgian chandeliers and colored glass lamps. The majority of Kochi Pardesis Jews have emigrated, but the synagogue remains intact.

Finally, two places to eat and enjoy the atmosphere of the area: the Mocha Art Café and the Ginger House. The Mocha is a magnificent spice warehouse from three centuries ago, with several Dutch-style rooms, where the synagogue rabbis lived, and today has a contemporary touch with exposed brick walls and vertical gardens. The Ginger House, hidden behind a huge warehouse, proposes us to eat among antiques.

Indian cuisine and Ayurveda yoga

Ayurveda yoga and Indian cooking courses have become one of the magnets for Europeans who arrive in this area. It is the main claim of Neema’s Kitchen, on Vypeen Island, where popular cooking classes from South India, or Cook & Eat, are offered in Fort Cochin.

In Ayurdara center what they teach is to practice third generation ayurveda and yoga. And at Loving Earth Yoga they teach Vinyasa, Ashtanga, Hatha and Yin yoga on a cool rooftop next to a vegan cafe where they serve tapas trays, Buddha bowls and creative salads. In the
Kerala Kathakali Center courses are offered classical dance Kathakali, music and makeup, as well as martial arts classes Kalarippayat.

Beaches, temples and synagogues

On the island of Vypeen, 25 kilometers north of Fort Cochin, there is a golden stretch of sand, Cherai Beach, where more and more people come. There are kilometers of backwaters and a series of fishing villages now with boutique-style bungalows that do not lack yoga and meditation sessions, Ayurvedic spas or Franco-Indian restaurants.

Nowhere in India is the religious fabric of the country as evident as here. 40 kilometers from Kochi, is the town of Chendamangalam, with one of the oldest synagogues in Kerala, in addition to a Jesuit church and school (in ruins), a Hindu temple on top of a hill overlooking the Periyar River, a 16th century mosque, and cemeteries of Muslims and Jews. The town of North Paravur, 20 kilometers from Kochi, where the agraharam (place of brahmins, the caste of priests, the highest of those that make up Indian society), a little street of brightly painted houses, is also worth a break, which has its origin in Tamil brahmins. The Chennamangalam area is famous for its traditional manual loom industry, devastated by flooding in the area in 2018, which caused fear for the livelihood of its 600 workers (almost all women). Since then, there is an important campaign led by local designers to resurrect this business driven by women; their chekkutty dolls, made with shattered saris, have become a symbol of the resistance of the weavers (and of Kerala as a whole).
Hindu temples can be found in Thrissur, a tourist-less place 86 kilometers from Kochi, where impressive Catholic churches live alongside a complex of Hindu temples, some ancient. Thrissur was the second capital of the royal family of Cochin in the sixteenth century and hosts a Christian community of the Nestorian current whose confession dates back to the third century.

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